

Teaching values in the classroom



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“ Replace an empty mind with an open one”

Malcolm Forbes’ simple quote above explains one important aspect of education which is that of broadening the mind. This could be one purpose of education but not the only one. A purpose could differ from one society to another or even from one time period to another. I shall illustrate this using the contrast between Singapore’s education system of the past and present.

In the 1800s under the British colonial rule, education was present “ to make the social structure more efficient” through vernacular schools. Later in the post-war period (1950s), schools were re-established to ensure societal progress on the road to self-governance. From 1960s onwards, education was seen as an essential tool for gaining the technical skills and competencies needed to face a more industrialized Singapore. Education was thus necessary to gain employment and possibly alleviate the family economic status. In the late 1970s however, there was a change proposed by late Dr. Goh Keng Swee to embrace a more “ efficiency-driven education” where the purpose was to cater to the different learning abilities of the students to make them learn at their own pace. The present education system however has evolved to be more holistic that prepares one to be a more globalised citizen. This ultimately links to globalised job opportunities. It can be clearly seen that the purpose of education has changed from that of improving literacy rate and getting a stable job to that of gaining the 21st century values, knowledge and expertise to work in a contemporary globalised world.

Purpose of Education

The purpose of education does not have to be the same for each individual because it ultimately depends on what one gains from the education he receives. In my view, the purpose of education is to acquire knowledge, values and skills of the 21st century that would prepare one to face the challenges of a contemporary globalised world of today and to motivate one to pursue life-long learning.

John Dewey's Philosophy

This purpose which is largely relevant to the current Singapore's context and time frame has been mostly derived from John Dewey's philosophy of education. John Dewey, a famous philosopher and educational theorist, believed that education is a process that should enhance the quality of life. He conceived an approach to education that would equip individuals with the skills and outlook that he believed were necessary for taking on the hardships and possibilities of life and thereby for building a better world.

He introduced the idea of an informal educational approach whereby the teachers would centre on the curriculum, instructional settings and the physical setting of the learning experience. Hence, teachers could select and come up with innovative learning activities that would stimulate the students to process and apply their curriculum content in more creative and original ways.

John Dewey also states that education involves “reconstruction” of a student's prior understanding and knowledge as he/she asks new questions and explores other perceptions of the like. This makes education a “

transformative” process where one does not gain new knowledge but rather expands on his existing one. This “transformation” would continue so long as new knowledge and information is discovered and learnt.

His theories therefore suggest that education has to be practical, engaging and transformational on top of just knowledge acquisition. Since his philosophy is more in line with Singapore’s educational system and cultural context, I have used it as a foundation for developing my purpose of education.

Positive Implications – Students

The educational purpose does have its implications on both the teaching and learning community in

Singapore, in particular to teachers and students in Singapore schools. The purpose can be split into two components, firstly the acquiring of 21st century competencies for a globalised world and secondly the motivation for life-long learning.

The former would allow students to become global players on an international platform. This would open the doors for better job prospects in the near future and thus render them internationally employable since job expectations have increased tremendously to include social communication, information technology, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The latter would make individuals active learners as they are more independent of their learning process and will not depend on the teachers for

spoon-feeding information. Thus when they are encouraged to find out for themselves, it will become a quest for knowledge.

How is this implied?

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has shifted its focus to adapt a more holistic educational approach by introducing the 21st century competencies and desired outcomes framework which illustrates the skills and values that an individual would possess after completing his education in Singapore. My main focus would be the inner red ring which represents the socio-emotional values that students will develop together with their core values and the outer orange ring which represents the 21st century skills that the students will gain. These are similar to the purpose that I have pointed out above which is that of acquiring the knowledge, values and skills of the 21st century.

Schools have therefore revamped their teaching styles and approaches so as to equip students with these competencies. With the implementation of the “Teach Less, Learn More” policy in 2004, teachers have taken one step back from the traditional teaching approach and started taking the role of a facilitator in the classroom. For instance, there have been project works being introduced as part of the course curriculum as it enhances students’ knowledge and enables them to acquire skills like collaboration, communication and independent learning. They would also be making links across different disciplines and applying the knowledge without just memorising the facts and figures for regurgitation during examinations.

Knowledge Aspect

A simple example would be the Integrated Project Work (IPW) that has been initiated in Bukit Merah Secondary School. It is a group project assignment for the lower secondary students which integrates three different subjects together namely English, Science and Humanities such that the students use the content from their Science and Humanities and their language power of English to come up with a project idea based on the task assigned. The final marks would then be split equally for the three subjects. No doubt IT skills would also come into play during the research stage where internet is the main resource and the presentation stage where PowerPoint, video and other visual aids would be used. IPW has also been used in North View Primary School as well as Republic Polytechnic.

Skills Aspect

Another MOE initiative would be Information Communication Technology (ICT) in schools. I would use my own secondary school, Crescent Girls' School (CGS) as an example. It was one of the first schools to introduce Mobile Learning (m-learning) through the use of tablet PCs in 2003. These PCs replaced the normal textbooks used by students as digital textbooks came into play and specialised software applications were installed as additional learning tools for Mathematics, English, Art and Geography. For instance, when preparing for our Oral Examinations, we recorded ourselves reading out a text and uploaded it as a podcast in our school's web portal. Our English teacher then gave us her comments for improvement after hearing it. This method increased the efficiency as it could be done outside curriculum time with no individual consultations with the teacher while also

making preparations for exams more fun. Group discussions were further facilitated by the portable PCs. These Tablet PCs allowed students to easily obtain information, expand their learning environment, find resources for innovative ideas and think critically.

Values Aspect

Lastly, I will look at the Social Emotional Learning programmes that are in place in schools. Compulsory Community Involvement Programmes (CIP) and Service-Learning initiatives allow students to gain awareness of their community and possibly the global environment. They can hone their core values such as graciousness, courtesy, integrity, care and concern which define an individual. Values like resilience, perseverance and confidence which are needed to overcome the challenges ahead are also instilled and developed via workshops. Just focusing on the skills and knowledge alone does not guarantee success so one must not ignore the values that shape a person.

These 3 aspects help to explain how my purpose has actually been achieved through some policies and pedagogies being effectively carried out in the local schools.

1) Negative Implication – Students

- Stress

On the other hand, there is the stress factor. As students have to learn the content as well as develop their other areas to face the globalised world, they would undoubtedly encounter the pressure of meeting deadlines and studying for their examinations. I believe that more time has to be set aside

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for revision for exams as these grades are clearly reflected in our academic certificates. When projects are assigned, more time should be allocated to prepare for the presentations and yet it has to be ensured that they do not clash with other deadlines and exam dates. Proper organization is of the essence here.

- “ Hate studying” attitude

Secondly, pushing the potential of students at a young age could possibly make them “ hate” studying. An example would be the introduction of Science in Primary 1. Although this move was to allow students to gain an exposure before being formally taught the subject in Primary 3, it would only confuse students especially since they have only stepped out of kindergarten into a new territory, the Primary School. Being bombarded with new information at this age could terrify them. I feel that it is better to familiarise them with the foundational subjects such as English, Mathematics and Mother Tongue first and let them get a grip on these first.

2) Positive Implication – Teachers

- Boost for creativity

Moving on, the next level of the school fraternity is the teachers. My purpose of education would give teachers the freedom to conduct their lessons in a more interesting and engaging way that is more effective for the students’ learning. Teachers can retain their formal role as an educator by imparting content knowledge but deviate from the conventional teaching method of reading from and writing on whiteboards to encouraging role-play and debates in the classroom setting. Thus, teachers come up with innovative

indirect teaching approaches that will largely boost their own creativity and originality in planning lessons. It would give them the opportunity for trial-and-error as they try out new ideas to reach out better to their students.

- Professional Development

As teachers motivate their students to be life-long learners, they themselves are motivated in the process to learn as they teach. This brings about professional development on the teacher's part which can be seen as another positive implication as the former principal of CGS, Mrs Lee Bee Yann once mentioned that “ Teachers have become more confident and reflective practitioners” when asked about the impact of m-learning on teachers. The teaching career would also seem more fulfilling and rewarding as they teach students important life skills infused with content knowledge rather than just English, Mathematics and Science alone.

3) Negative Implication – Teachers

- Stress

Trying to mould each individual to acquire the required 21st century competencies and motive them to be independent learners can be seen as not an easy task since each individual differs in their own set of strengths and weaknesses. This may contribute to stress of a different kind that relates to the question of “ How to teach as creatively as possible yet ensuring that the student gains the necessary skills out of it?”

Attending educational forums overseas could help teachers see how teaching is done in other schools on a worldwide scale and implement them in their schools. Also via cooperative learning, ideas can be shared among

colleagues. Moreover it will not seem to be a daunting task once the psychological behaviour of students are understood and their motivational factors are identified as these would aid in getting them to acquire the knowledge and skills while shaping their values.

Conclusion

The purpose of education, which I derived from John Dewey's philosophy, is that of acquiring knowledge, skills and values of the 21st century that would prepare one to face the challenges of a contemporary globalised world of today and that of being motivated to pursue life-long learning. However, the purpose has both positive and negative implications for the teachers and students in Singapore Schools but there are possible suggested solutions which can minimize the negative effects.

My purpose may not be the only purpose of education. As I mentioned earlier different individuals will have their own purpose depending on their future goals. It may be subjective but most definitely not wrong.